



Leaving Farm Collage by Kevin Paterson

Diary of a farmer's last born: Why I'm uprooting my legacy, while growing with the change of the land

BY KEVIN PATTERSON

With a collection of emotions, I close a long chapter in my life.

I am leaving the farm, a way of life that I have been part of since I was born. My father, grandfather and a number of other family members were farm operators and owners. The farm (like many in Niagara) occupies its own separate world, with a collection of living beings following their own life cycles. My move is a happy one: I am beginning a future with my fiancée Kim (White), a new chapter in my own life cycle.

My changing situation is not unlike many farmers in Niagara. Others have enlarged and rationalized their operations, changed to take advantage of different economic opportunities, such as agritourism, innovative food and other natural products, specialty crops and commodities, or sold land for use in commercial or residential industries. In a number of instances, the farmer, or a spouse (in the case of a family farm) has taken a second job to provide additional income. To survive in the business of agriculture, farmers accept there is one constant – change.

For the farmer in Niagara, change must be embraced to keep farm operations viable.

Change is reflected in statistics presented in the Niagara Regional Agricultural Impact Study released in the fall of 2003. While this study shows Niagara is slowly losing farmland and farmers, our peninsula still ranks first in the province in average farm gross receipts of \$2,195 per acre and fourth in total gross receipts at \$511,395,019. Agriculture continues to be one of the key component industries in the Niagara economy.

Another change is reflected in the top-selling commodities: In 1986, poultry and egg, then fruit, were the top two commodity groups in sales. In 2001, products from greenhouses were ranked as the top commodity group.

You see the continuing change in farms by looking at the equipment parked out front. Like the cars we drive, farm equipment, such as tractors, have gone through a major evolution in the last century, becoming more efficient and trying to keep up with new farming methods. Another way to comprehend the change is to talk to

Continued on page 22

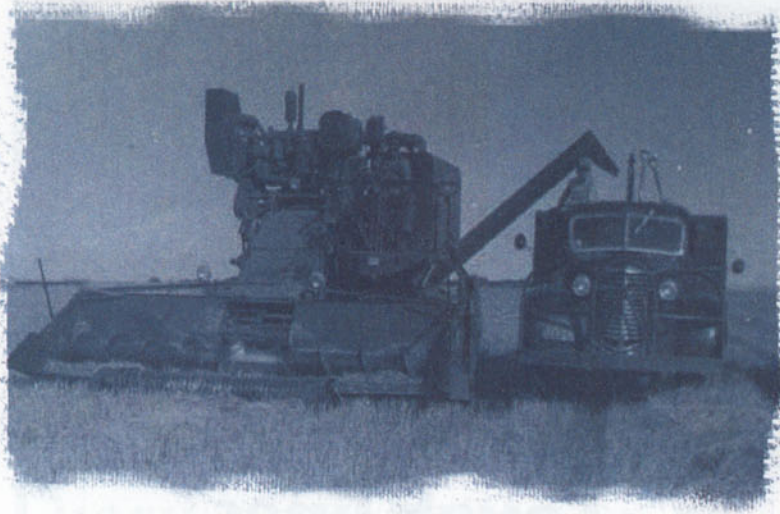
Digging out

neighbours and friends in the industry.

More than one farmer has told me of an increasing number of neighbouring farms sold off to urban development. Between 1996 and 2001, 648 farms were sold in the Niagara Region.

Niagara's decline in the number of farms occurs at a higher rate than that of the province.

Pressure towards urban growth gradually has been increasing in a number of regions. At one time, driving down a country road in Niagara meant you could observe fields filled with crops, tender fruit on the trees or in the vineyards, along with accompanying farm houses and attendant buildings. Now, the farms slowly disappear, replaced by properties and homes built by people continually moving out of the city looking for a quieter existence.



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I observe changes in the farming life through photographs of parents, grandparents, friends and family. Most depicted in the photographs now are gone.

I see my grandfather sitting in his old car in front of the old farmhouse, in which he, my grandmother, father and uncle once lived. Here is a picture of my father and grandfather standing on a snow-covered and windswept field of their farm in the eastern townships of Quebec. I look at a photo of my father, standing with his mother out front of their farmhouse. In another photograph, I see my father driving an old tractor through a large field of wheat. That photo was taken in 1950, when he joined an army of other eastern farmers heading west to work in the grain harvest.

A more recent photo shows my father standing in front of a poultry barn filled with chickens. This photo was taken after my parents had sold the farm in Quebec and moved to Ontario. Thirty-five years later, the farm I live on and the equipment I use has changed with the nature of the poultry industry. It continues to change as new methods continually are adopted.

Adapting to change, though, can become difficult. For me, survival, and more importantly, further growth as a farmer, was growing a lot tougher as time passed.

Ultimately, it became a serious drain physi-

cally and emotionally. I came to realize I was living my father's life – not mine.

After more than 20 years, it is time to move on (or taking early retirement, as some of my friends have called it) to new challenges, such as building websites, graphic design, continuing to work and volunteer at the local library, writing, photography and settling into a new life with my fiancée.

What I will miss most about the farm is its culture.

Culture, put simply, means the daily routine of the farm: Watching the sunrise and sunset and following the steady march of the seasons as they pass. It means talking with long-time friends and neighbours up and down the road and meeting up with them in town or at any number of community events.

In our area (Smithville), Poultry Fest is a unique-to-home example of an event that involves participation from local citizens, as well as sponsorship by the poultry industry, which has become an annual tradition.

Animals and birds pay visits to the farm at different times of the year. For the last six years I've had the privilege of hosting a pair of Canada Geese, who use a pond behind the house for a few weeks during their migrations north and south. My fiancée christened them Fred and Ethel. These are among the small creatures who create a special atmosphere.

In preparations for moving from this farm, I discovered my past was far richer than I could have imagined. The photos and other treasures I found helped me better understand who my parents and other family were. They confirm the fact that life – like agriculture – is constantly changing. I have no doubt that, 20 years from now, farming in the region will be completely different than it is now.

How it will be different, I cannot say, but, it will survive. The agricultural industry is tied into so many other aspects of life in Niagara that it has become part of its essential character. Some things never will change, such as the ongoing life cycles of the plants and animals that inhabit the land and the idea that each of us has to work to create a place we can call home. **L**